



IS THERE A LINK BETWEEN BURNOUT AND WORKPLACE CONFLICT?

Since July is Mental Health Awareness Month and 4-8 July is Corporate Wellness Week; in this issue, we look at whether there is correlation between burnout and conflict with colleagues in the workplace.

Deadline after deadline is looming and you are at the end of your tether when a colleague asks for help with a project they are supposed to have a handle on.

Suddenly, weeks of frustration boil over and you snap, barking at your unsuspecting colleague who had no idea of your demanding workload.

Later, once you have calmed down, you feel guilty about the unnecessary tension you've created – which only adds to your emotional fatigue.

IS BURNOUT TO BLAME?

If this sounds familiar, you might be burned out. True burnout is more than just tiredness – it's the result of work and life overload and a lack of resources to handle this load over a period of time, says Luzanne Liversage, an educational psychologist from Johannesburg.

“Chronic stress and poor work/life balance are often to blame, but there are many contributing factors unique to each individual. It starts off slowly and you often aren't even aware that you're burned out until serious symptoms occur.”

Symptoms of burnout include:

- emotional and physical exhaustion
- cynicism, negativity and frustration
- feelings of guilt, depression, apathy or low self-esteem
- feeling unable to handle small challenges
- sleeplessness or anxiety about going to work
- forgetfulness, concentration problems or making more mistakes than usual
- feeling like your achievements are worthless or that your work has no meaning.

It's easy to see why all these symptoms would contribute to a shorter fuse and more conflict at work. Small issues can seem insurmountable when you are burned out, permanently tense and ready to snap.



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONFLICT AND BURNOUT



When it comes to workplace conflict and burnout, it's a two-way street: burnout can cause conflict, and conflict contributes to burnout. Conflict also doesn't necessarily mean confrontation. Unfair treatment and a hostile work environment are examples of workplace conflict that contribute to burnout.

Several studies have shown that employees who experience workplace conflict suffer from strain symptoms such as depression and burnout. It may be tempting to see burnout as a sign of personal failure – but in nearly every observed instance in one large-scale study, burnout had external causes. These included long hours and a lack of breaks, being expected to remain 'plugged in' when at home, organisational dysfunction such as a lack of clear communication, injustices and abuses of power.

Burned-out employees who feel frustrated are not very productive and will then cause other conflicts in turn. And the vicious cycle will continue.

HOW TO HEAL

Somewhere, the buck needs to stop. Even if you are feeling burned out, it's up to you to put measures in place to do so.

Unfortunately, simply taking a break is not enough to cure burnout, as the problem will still be there when you return, says Luzanne. “If you're burned out, you need to take a long, hard look at your life, identify problems, and think of ways to address them.”

Assess how you are spending your time over at least one week. For each block of time, record what you do, with who, how you feel, and how important the activity is. This will help you identify which tasks, situations or relationships drain you and which energise you.

Ask yourself which aspects of your situation are truly fixed and which you can change. Which tasks could you delegate to free up meaningful time and energy? Are there ways to reshape your job and responsibilities?

Then, take action to improve your workplace challenges, reduce stress and enhance work/life balance. There are some ways to do this:

- Speak to your manager or HR to make realistic changes to your workload, schedule or responsibilities.
- Strengthen positive relationships and get support from friends, family or colleagues.
- Practise stress-reducing techniques such as deep breathing, yoga or meditation.
- Separate work and your personal life.
- Make sure that you have enough personal time and take breaks when you need to.
- Prioritise self-care such as good sleeping habits, nutrition and exercise.



Burnout can feel overwhelming, but if you take it as a warning sign, instead of adopting it as the new status quo, you will take the first step to changing your life for the better. Work can again become engaging and energising – and colleagues your allies, not your adversaries.

References

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CQ Net
Harvard Business Review

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